Defense Calls Witnesses in Dahmer Death Case

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Relatives, Friends Testify in Trial of 10

By JAMES H. DOWNEY

MERIDIAN, Miss. (AP)—The defense called up alibi and character witnesses Wednesday for 10 Ku Klux Klansmen on trial for conspiracy in the fire-death of Vernon Dahmer Sr.

Relatives and friends paraded to the stand in federal district court to testify for the Jones County men charged with conspiring to intimidate the Negro voting rights leader who died Jan. 10, 1966, after his home and store near Hattiesburg were firebombed by nightriders.

Jesse White, one of the first defense witnesses, refused to answer a number of questions by defense lawyers on grounds they might tend to incriminate him.

NAME MENTIONED

White's name had been mentioned frequently by defense lawyers as a man who was a federal informer on the Klan and as a go-between linking the government with government witness Billy Roy Pitts.

Among the questions he ducked were whether he had conveyed money to Pitts for the government and whether he had helped Pitts draw up statements for the government implicating the defendants.

Former Jones County Sheriff Merrill Pickering was called as a witness for Deavours Nix and he testified that he considered the reputation of the admitted Klansman to be good.

Pickering, who was sheriff from 1964-68, said he had heard Nix mentioned as a member of the Klan but said such talk would not change his opinion of the man.

PROBE OFFICER

As sheriff, Pickering was a top officer in the Dahmer probe and other Klan activities.

The Rev. Ollie F. Parker, a Jones County Baptist minister, said he had known Nix all his life and considered his reputation good.

Mrs. Evangeline Bowers of Jackson, mother of the defendant Sam H. Bowers Jr., former imperial wizard of the White Knights of the KKK, said her son was visiting her that night because she had asked him to come by before going to Washington to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee.

"He had promised to come see me before he went to Washington to testify before some ridiculous committee," she said.

Mrs. Henry DeBoxtel said her husband was "home in bed with me (at the time of the Dahmer attack). We sleep in a double bed."

'WENT TO WORK'

Mrs. Charles Richard Noble said her husband went to work at 2 p. m. that day and returned for supper at 11:30 p. m. She said he got up and went deer hunting at 4:30 a. m. the morning after Dahmer was killed and had spent the interim at home.

She had heard he was a member of the White Knights of the KKK, she said, but he never told her he was.

Mrs. Frank Lyons said her husband was home all day on Jan. 9 and did not leave for work at the Masonite plant until 7 a. m. the next morning.

Mrs. Velma Sessum said her son Cecil Victor Sessum was staying at her home the night of the Dahmer attack. She said he returned home from church at 9 p. m. and went out of the house only once to sell gas to two men who had run out. The family operates a country store.

'SAW LIGHT'

Mrs. Ruth Smith, mother of defendant William Thomas Smith, said her son came in about 11 p. m. the night of the attack and did not leave until the next day. During cross-examination, she conceded she did not actually see him, but said she heard him come in and saw a light in his room.

Mrs. Lester Thornton said her husband went to bed at 8 the night of the attack and did not leave until the next morning. Six other persons were brought to the stand and testified that Thornton had good character and a good reputation.